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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [XL](#)
SUBJECT: ST. VINCENT OPPOSITION - MORE HARD TIMES AHEAD

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY: CDA D. BRENT HARDT, REASONS 1.4
(B, D)

Summary

[¶](#)1. (C) Former St. Vincent Ambassador to the UN and cabinet minister under previous Mitchell administrations, Jonathan Peters, announced his return to politics in St. Vincent in a January 13 meeting at the Embassy. Peters has an ambitious plan both to take control of the opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) and to challenge Ralph Gonsalves for the Premiership. To do so, however, Peters said the NDP desperately needed an infusion of funds - which he seemed to hope the USG might provide. End summary.

Peters Returns from the U.S.

[¶](#)2. (C) Jonathan Peters, a longtime resident of New York and a U.S. citizen, declared to emboffs during a January 13 office call his intention to challenge Arnhim Eustace for the leadership of the opposition NDP and to run against Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves in the next elections. Absent for over a decade, Peters, an old veteran of St. Vincent politics, believes Gonsalves will not call elections until late in 2010. Constitutionally, elections are due between September 2010 and December 2010. In the meantime, Peters is attempting to align political and financial support for his run at Gonsalves in the PM's own constituency.

A Steep Climb to the Top

[¶](#)3. (C) Facing a steep uphill battle, Peters must first defeat Eustace for the leadership of the NDP. He is preparing for a challenge to Eustace during the NDP convention and hopes to gain control soon as possible so he can proceed with his challenge to Gonsalves. Although Peters does not believe current NDP leader Arnhim Eustace is the future leadership of the NDP owing to a lack of charisma, he still sees Eustace as a talented technocrat and generously stated he would retain Eustace as his Minister of Finance if he wins the elections. Peters' plan, he said, is to convince the NDP's two sitting MPs to endorse him as party President and to secure the endorsement also of party founder and former PM Sir James Mitchell (who he considers a close friend) to grease the skids for his election as NDP president, and to unite and re-energize the party behind him. Peters said he has sold one of his houses in St. Vincent to finance the campaign for party leadership, and has been on a months-long walking tour of his constituency, meeting with every voter to raise his profile.

[¶](#)4. (C) Once Peters has secured the party leadership, he hopes

to challenge sitting PM Ralph Gonsalves in his own constituency. Peters said he believes the country is tiring of Gonsalves and his populist gimmicks, trampling of rule of law, and lack of direction on the economy. He painted Gonsalves as a committed Castro-ite who hopes to walk in the shoes of Maurice Bishop. Peters added that, in the event that polling shows him unable to contest Gonsalves' seat, he will challenge instead for a "safe" seat in another constituency where he owns a home and could run.

A Cash-Strapped Campaign

¶ 15. (C) Peters went on to acknowledge that, with all its significant donors drying up, the NDP is in a state of financial disarray and almost completely out of cash. Peters stated the NDP has mortgaged its long-time and symbolic headquarters building, Democratic House, in order to pay its short-term bills, and now the party cannot even make the monthly payment on that loan. By contrast, he said, Gonsalves has bragged often about having US\$30 million in the bank to finance an election campaign, along with populist infrastructure projects that are bringing jobs and economic activity in the short run (and thereby, he surmised, buying votes). Peters hinted that Mitchell had offered to find financing "from a friend" in the amount of some \$2 million to support party activities, but details were nebulous.

¶ 16. (C) In short, Peters said, the NDP needed cash to unseat Gonsalves, and he asked how much the USG might be able to provide. Emboffs noted the USG does not fund foreign political parties or interfere in internal politics, but offered to put him in touch with the National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute, which might be able to assist with institutional capacity building for the opposition.

Gonsalves as Dangerous Communist

¶ 17. (C) Peters said he was approaching the USG because of a perceived commonality of interest. St. Vincent, he opined, was quickly deteriorating, and he blamed Gonsalves personally for most of the country's ills. Gonsalves, he said, had no plans for the economy, relying instead on unsustainable big infrastructure projects to curry political favor without adding long-term value to the economy.

¶ 18. (C) Concerned about Gonsalves' recent opening of diplomatic ties with Iran, Peters pointed out that St. Vincent passports are not difficult to obtain (buy), and he surmised that it is only a matter of time before Iranians began to obtain St. Vincent citizenship and passports. Peters said seeing a country like Barbados establishing ties with such a regime might be tolerable, given Barbados' strong democratic credentials, but he worried that Gonsalves, with his strong personal and ideological ties to Cuba, Venezuela, and Bolivia and his disregard for rule of law at home, made a new friendship with Iran a frightening proposition for the region.

Comment

¶ 19. (C) Jonathan Peters is certainly not lacking in self-confidence. Some of his analysis of the problems facing the country and the NDP is consistent with what other Vincentians opposed to Gonsalves have been saying for some time. Many in St. Vincent are worried about the economy, doubtful Gonsalves is doing anything about it, and concerned equally about his manipulation of the police and judiciary to escape rape charges and about his intimidation of opposition media and others in the community who challenge his policies.

Peters' analysis of the opposition's dire straits is similarly consistent with what we've heard elsewhere.

¶10. (C) That said, Peters' hopefulness for his own chances to take the reins of the party and defeat Gonsalves in his home seat is likely exaggerated. Former PM Mitchell seems to still have an interest in returning to politics (though Peters believes Mitchell won't return unless the NDP hands him the leadership by acclamation), and as such is unlikely to endorse Peters. Similarly, sitting MPs will not lightly throw in their lot with a prodigal son who spends most of his time in New York and who would have citizenship issues clouding his candidacy. The bottom line for the NDP is probably the bottom line - i.e., whoever can bring the money to the party that is needed to revive it and to finance a campaign against a charismatic populist PM is likely to get the nod for leadership.

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